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SIPDIS

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EMBASSIES FOR CONS CHIEFS, FPU AND DHS

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SUBJECT: Smuggling of Bulgarians through Mexico

1. Bulgaria is a transit point for illegal migration and alien smuggling as well as a source country for illegal migration to the United States. A common smuggling scheme remains for Bulgarians to obtain Mexican visas, travel to Mexico as tourists and from there cross illegally into the U.S. This MO has been employed for many years, though it has become more difficult recently for Bulgarians to obtain Mexican tourist visas.

2. To circumvent this obstacle, traffickers have begun to obtain transit visas instead of tourist visas for their Bulgarian "cargo." This new ploy involves would-be illegal migrants applying (often through a "travel agent," as a group) for Mexican visas simply to proceed to their supposed final destination -- Guatemala or, more often, Belize. Of course the applicants have no intention of going to those countries, but rather to enter Mexico and head for the northern border. According to FPU sources, the traffickers' favorite targets right now are the Mexican Embassies in Vienna, Paris and Bucharest (there is no Mexican Embassy in Sofia, and Bulgaria is officially under the jurisdiction of the Mexican Embassy in Budapest). If in fact these Embassies, along with the Embassy in Budapest, are issuing transit visas to Bulgarians, we would strongly suspect corruption is at play.

3. Last year FPU contacts in the National Police informed us that the Bulgarian Embassy in Mexico had reported a case in which a Bulgarian Travel Agency, "Eliasko," had attempted to smuggle more than 50 Bulgarians to the U.S. through Mexico. Eliasko is well known to us, and has been on our black list since 2002. The owner of the agency is Ilya Rafael Beraha, DPOB 20 Aug 1962, Bulgaria. Beraha is also an LPR, A047-590-1277. According to Police here, Beraha was arrested in Mexico for Alien Smuggling in December 2004. A CLASS namecheck made on 2/7/05 showed that USCBP entered him into CLASS as a 00 hit (UID: CUS P9L76452300C26) on 17 December 2004. The associated comments showed Beraha was arrested in Mexico along with Rumen Kacankov, another known smuggler also associated with Bulgarian organized crime figures. However, inexplicably, a CLASS namecheck we made last week showed no record for Beraha. On 17 February 2006 we entered him into CLASS once again as a P6E.

4. One very reliable FPU confidential source, who has provided us with valuable and detailed information in the past on alien smuggling and visa fraud operations here, confirmed in a 15 February telcon that Beraha is still very much in the trafficking business. He is currently in Sofia, still running Eliasko, and purportedly the top smuggler of Bulgarians via Mexico. According to our source Beraha personally arranges his charges' Mexican (as well as Guatemalan and Belizian) visas, for about USD 1000 each. He accompanies Bulgarian groups to Mexico City, where they are passed on to Mexican handlers. These handlers charge each migrant some USD 3000.

5. Beraha is reported to have a special relationship with the Mexican Embassy in Vienna, where he supposedly has personal inside contacts. We have word that Beraha will be traveling to Vienna by bus on 26 February to obtain transit visas for yet more Bulgarians who have decided they just have to go see what they've been missing in Belize. Most likely Beraha would apply for visas to Belize the day after he arrives in Vienna, then forward all passports to the Mexican Embassy for transit visas. Our source insists that more than 600 Mexican transit visas were issued to Bulgarians from the Mexican Embassies in Vienna, Paris, Bucharest and Budapest in January, 2006 alone. The majority of the applicants were previously refused U.S. tourist visas by us here in Sofia.

6. ACTION REQUESTED: We ask Vienna, Bucharest, Paris and Budapest to "alert" their counterparts at Mexican Embassies that Bulgarians seeking transit visas should be the objects of close scrutiny, as most of them are probably misrepresenting their actual intentions. We also ask Mexico City to enlist Mexican MFA's aid in cracking down on the transit visa business for Bulgarians.

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